Herman Badillo

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 1971-1977 DEMOCRAT FROM NEW YORK

erman Badillo compiled a series of historic firsts, becoming the first Hispanic borough president in New York City and the first voting Member elected to the U.S. House of Representatives who had been born in Puerto Rico. During his seven years in Congress, Badillo used his position to draw attention to the plight of the inner cities and to urge federal assistance for numerous impoverished minorities residing in New York City. A fourtime New York City mayoral candidate—twice while a Member of the House—Badillo was a major figure in local politics and policy for more than 40 years. "I represent the original immigrant," Badillo asserted. "Everybody says that their parents and grandparents came here and couldn't speak English and they were poor. And in my case it wasn't my parents and grandparents. It was me."

Herman Badillo was born on August 21, 1929, in Caguas, Puerto Rico. His father, Francisco Badillo, taught in a public school, and his mother, Carmen Rivera, spent her time on charitable activities. In 1934 a tuberculosis epidemic swept through the island, claiming the lives of Badillo's parents and one of his grandmothers. Badillo's grandfather and aunt, Aurelia Rivera, who had two children of her own, raised him for the next several years. In 1941 Aurelia Rivera moved to New York City, along with Badillo and one of her sons. His aunt's financial problems forced young Badillo to move several times over the next few years, first to Chicago to live with an uncle and then to California to stay with another family member. Back in New York City in 1944, he attended Haaren High School. Placed in vocational classes because of his ethnicity, Badillo eventually switched to a more traditional academic track, and in 1947 he graduated with stellar grades.²

In the years after World War II, City College of New York offered free tuition to students with high grades, and the school became known as the Harvard of the Poor.³

Badillo enrolled in City College in the fall of 1947, majored in business, and graduated with a bachelor's degree in business administration in 1951. He then worked as an accountant while attending night classes at Brooklyn Law School, where he won election to the law review. In 1954 he graduated as class valedictorian with an LL.B. He was admitted to the New York bar in 1955 and certified as a public accountant the following year; he worked as an accountant and a lawyer on Wall Street through the 1950s. In 1949 Badillo married Norma Lit. The couple had a son, David Alan, before divorcing in 1960. A year later Badillo married Irma Liebling, who had two children from a previous marriage. After Irma's death in 1996, Badillo married Gail Roberts, a New York City schoolteacher.

Badillo arrived in the United States on the cusp of the Great Migration, the postwar movement of Puerto Rican immigrants eager for better job opportunities who relocated to New York City. The beginning of Badillo's political career coincided with the growing importance and influence of Puerto Ricans in the city. He obtained his first political position in 1958, when he joined the Caribe Democratic Club. In 1960 he chaired John F. Kennedy's campaign committee for East Harlem. Badillo supported the 1961 reelection campaign of New York City Mayor Robert Wagner, Jr., and Wagner reciprocated by appointing him to a number of posts. In 1962 when Badillo took over as commissioner of the Department of Housing and Relocation, he became the highest-ranking Hispanic official in the city. Badillo stepped down from that position in 1965 to run for Bronx borough president.⁶ After narrowly defeating a state senator backed by the county Democratic machine, he became, at age 36, the first Hispanic president of a New York City borough. "The margin of victory is small, but almost miraculous, considering that I did not have the support of the regular organization," Badillo remarked after his historic win.⁷



In 1969, he entered the Democratic primary for New York City mayor. Proclaiming himself the "only liberal candidate" in the crowded race, Badillo captured 28 percent of the vote, narrowly trailing former mayor Wagner and primary winner Mario Procaccino, the New York City comptroller.8

Badillo's showing in the primary indicated that he was a strong mayoral candidate for 1973, although his political career appeared to have stalled. But in 1970 the New York legislature redrew the state's congressional districts, creating a new district that comprised portions of Queens, Manhattan, and the Bronx, connected by the Triborough Bridge. Described as "one of the more diverse urban Congressional districts in the country," it was inhabited by African Americans, whites, and Hispanics.9 Badillo entered the race as the frontrunner, based on his background as borough president, his strong showing in the 1969 mayoral primary, and the district's many Puerto Rican constituents. He earned endorsements from the Amsterdam News, the city's leading African-American newspaper, and the New York Times, which described Badillo as "head and shoulders" above his competitors, a man who "believes in seeking change through the political process ... an innovator, conciliator, and forceful leader."10

But the primary in the heavily Democratic district was far more competitive than expected. Former state senator Dennis Coleman, an African American, received the backing of Representative Shirley Chisholm of New York, the first black woman elected to Congress. Ramon Velez, an antipoverty administrator who had the support of the Bronx machine, heavily courted Puerto Rican voters in the district, as did Father Louis Gigante, a Roman Catholic priest from a parish in the Bronx. With multiple candidates competing for votes from Manhattan and the Bronx, Queens lawyer Peter Vallone—a future city council president and Democratic gubernatorial nominee—sought to consolidate Astoria's predominantly white, workingclass voters. Badillo finished first, edging out Vallone by 587 votes and taking 30 percent of the primary tally. With no Republican contender, his victory in the fall seemed assured. Vallone challenged the result, however, and a lower-court judge in Queens ruled that 798 of the ballots

had been cast by unregistered, Republican, or Liberal Party voters. As this total exceeded Badillo's margin of victory, the court invalidated the result and ordered a new primary. Badillo appealed, and on September 30, 1970, an appellate court sided with him, reinstating him as the nominee. Coasting to victory in November, Badillo won 84 percent of the vote against Conservative Party candidate George Smaragdas, a Vietnam veteran who attacked Badillo for his antiwar stance.

Badillo made history with his election to the 92nd Congress (1971–1973). The first person born in Puerto Rico to represent a district in the continental United States, Badillo was also the first person of Puerto Rican descent to serve as a voting Member of Congress. Badillo made headlines early in his first term when the Ways and Means Committee, which made committee assignments, rejected his request to serve on the Education and Labor Committee. Badillo was named to the Agriculture Committee instead, a move he deemed "an insult to those I represent."13 The Democratic Study Group formally protested on Badillo's behalf, while a delegation of New York City Democrats met privately with Speaker Carl Albert of Oklahoma and Ways and Means chairman Wilbur Mills of Arkansas to recommend reversing Badillo's assignment. In a highly unusual move, the full Democratic Caucus, with Albert's backing, named Badillo to the Education and Labor Committee. 14 In the 94th Congress (1975–1977), Badillo switched from the Education and Labor Committee to the Judiciary and Small Business Committees. In the 95th Congress (1977–1979), Badillo retained his seat on Small Business but left the Judiciary Committee and joined the Banking, Finance and Urban Affairs Committee, a post of local importance given New York City's major financial crisis during the 1970s.

The Education and Labor Committee, which had jurisdiction over many antipoverty initiatives, served as the foundation for Badillo's highest-profile legislative work. On March 4, 1971, in his first major speech on the House Floor, Badillo urged a \$20 billion federal government loan to the states and cities. "If we are going to save our cities from destruction," he said to his colleagues, "we must do it with

a massive infusion of money if this Nation's cities are not to sink irretrievably into filth, decay, and crime." According to the Congressman's proposal, New York City would receive \$760 million from the federal government. "We lend money all the time to foreign governments," Badillo mused. "Why shouldn't we make loans to our cities and states which are on the verge of collapsing?" As a member of the General Education Subcommittee, Badillo also championed moreaggressive federal action to aid minority students. In a 1971 hearing, he expressed support for mandatory school busing programs to achieve integration. 17

Badillo also advocated equal rights for residents of Puerto Rico. On May 4, 1971, the New York Representative took to the House Floor to furnish detailed information on the economic woes of Puerto Rico and a multipart proposal to improve conditions there. Badillo called attention to the incongruity of Puerto Rican citizens' being subject to the draft but ineligible for federal benefits programs such as food stamps, the school milk program, and portions of Social Security. "I am fully prepared to offer amendments, where necessary and appropriate, to all pending and future measures to place Puerto Rico on a basis equal with the States," Badillo told his colleagues. 18 Keenly aware of the surging debate about whether Puerto Rico should pursue statehood or independence, Badillo remarked, "Only the people of Puerto Rico should decide, free of any outside influence or pressure." Regardless of the island's uncertain future status, however, Badillo urged Congress to provide Puerto Rico with the same federal aid as the United States.19

During his time in Congress, Badillo urged the Puerto Ricans in his community to seek change by working within the system. He reached out to the high school students in his district, scheduling a series of lectures by Puerto Rican professionals. "The Puerto Rican who grows up in the city of New York does not see the totality of Puerto Rican society," Badillo said. "He sees only people who are the poorest, who have the worst education, the worst employment and live in the worst housing conditions." He criticized the naming of a Harlem public school after Pedro Albizu Campos, a Puerto Rican independence

activist who endorsed terrorist activities in the 1930s.²¹ Badillo also worried that federally funded antipoverty programs in New York City were encouraging ethnic enclaves rather than cooperation between differing groups.²² He did what he could to promote conciliation—creating community councils in each part of his district to facilitate cooperation between local activists and the federal government—and to achieve consensus in his ethnically diverse electorate. He established joint district offices with state and local legislators to handle constituent complaints and to show his willingness to reach out to elected officials from various ethnic backgrounds.²³

Badillo's more conciliatory approach to Puerto Rican identity politics met with resistance in the 1972 primary. Redistricting dramatically altered the boundaries of his congressional district, which lost its sections in Manhattan and Queens and consisted solely of the South Bronx, running from the downtrodden Mott Haven and Port Morris neighborhoods eastward to working-class Hunts Point and part of Soundview. The district was divided almost evenly between Puerto Rican and African-American constituents, with a small white minority.24 "The working coalitions I have helped to form in my first term hold out real hope for the future of the city," Badillo stated when he announced his decision to run for re-election despite the redistricting.²⁵ Manuel Ramos, a New York assemblyman of Puerto Rican descent, launched a primary challenge against Badillo. During the campaign, Ramos dismissed Badillo as insufficiently militant, arguing, "Trying to work with others is no good." The challenger also attacked Badillo for living outside the district in the upscale Bronx neighborhood of Riverdale, ridiculed his polished speaking style, and claimed the Congressman "doesn't think like a Puerto Rican."26 To hold off Ramos, Badillo rallied support from the district's small Jewish population, reached out to new African-American voters in the redrawn district, and bolstered Puerto Rican support by citing his standing as a pioneering politician. Badillo's strategy proved sufficient, and he easily rebuffed Ramos in the primary capturing 78 percent of the vote.²⁷ Ramos appeared on the November ballot as the Republican nominee, but Badillo earned an

impressive 87 percent of the vote in the overwhelmingly Democratic district.²⁸

In the 93rd Congress (1973–1975), Badillo championed the interests of Hispanic workers by ensuring that the Comprehensive Manpower Act of 1973 included funding for job training for unemployed U.S. citizens who spoke no English. In 1974 Badillo had a significant role in expanding federal support for bilingual education. During the debate on the bill to extend and amend the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, Badillo, concerned that the majority of the House might not back legislation seeking more money for bilingual education, offered an amendment on the House Floor to bolster bilingual education in American schools, but then quickly withdrew it. After the Senate approved funding for bilingual education, Badillo's amendment, with the help of the sympathetic chairman of the House Committee on Education and Labor, Carl Perkins of Kentucky, was added to the conference committee's report and remained part of the legislation that became law on August 21, 1974.²⁹

Throughout his tenure in the House, Badillo demonstrated a community-centered approach. The New York Representative justified his decision to spend significant amounts of time in his district. Congress "will approve a program, but they will not fund it in significant enough amounts to make a difference," he explained.³⁰ In any case, he added, "Congress is at a standstill because of Watergate."31 Badillo consistently supported initiatives to help his many disadvantaged constituents, including legislation regarding increased employment, comprehensive child care, and community development programs.³² Badillo's high profile and frequent appearances in New York—including his public defense of prisoners' rights after the 1971 riots at the Attica State Correctional Facility—put him in a favorable position for the 1973 Democratic New York City mayoral primary. 33 Badillo carried both Manhattan and the Bronx, finishing 5 points behind New York City comptroller Abraham Beame. Neither candidate received 40 percent of the vote, necessitating a runoff, and Beame compiled huge margins among white voters in Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island, prevailing by 61 to 39 percent.³⁴

Despite his loss in the mayoral primary, Badillo easily won re-election to his House seat in 1974, running unopposed in the Democratic primary and garnering 97 percent of the vote in the general election.³⁵ During the 94th Congress, Badillo introduced legislation to ease bankruptcy requirements for U.S. cities. An outspoken supporter of federal aid for New York City, Badillo believed cities seeking a way to escape major debt should not be held to the same rules as individuals in the same situation. "It is utterly irresponsible to put anything above the health and safety of New Yorkers—particularly the well-being of banks and other large creditors," Badillo pronounced.³⁶ His municipal bankruptcy legislation included language to prevent federal courts from obstructing local authorities in cities experiencing a financial crisis. "If we understand the limited jurisdiction that we have in this bill, we will be able to provide meaningful assistance to localities that need it," Badillo reminded his House colleagues.³⁷ After Badillo's bill easily passed the House and Senate, President Gerald Ford signed a version of the measure on April 8, 1976. "Now we can get something done in New York City," Badillo said.³⁸

In the 1976 Democratic primary, Badillo's rivalry with Beame—which stemmed largely from his consistent criticism of the mayor's administration—persisted when Ramon Velez, a Beame ally and one of Badillo's 1970 challengers, battled him for the Democratic nomination. Badillo dismissed his opponent as Beame's "puppet" and "chosen hatchet man," and comfortably prevailed in his bid for a fourth term in the House.³⁹ He faced no Republican opposition in the general election and garnered 99 percent of the vote. 40 In the 95th Congress, Badillo focused mainly on city politics and geared up for another mayoral run. The 1977 Democratic mayoral primary attracted high-quality candidates, including Representative Ed Koch, former New York Representative Bella Abzug, New York secretary of state and future governor Mario Cuomo, and Manhattan borough president Percy Sutton. Badillo's campaign never gained traction, and he finished in sixth place.⁴¹

After his loss, Badillo endorsed Koch, who defeated Cuomo in a runoff and went on to win the general election. On November 29, 1977, Badillo stunned local political observers by announcing that he intended to resign from the House to serve as deputy mayor under Koch. Badillo said his new job, which involved a pay cut, would allow him to implement his agenda and to confront the "unpleasant tasks" that too many politicians avoided. "I ran for Mayor because I felt that I had the talents, energies and programs to turn the city around and bring it out of its present crisis," Badillo said after making known his decision to leave the House. "I lost that race but now the winner has asked me to apply those very talents and energies in a way that will best serve the city. I did not see how I could refuse." The New York Representative officially left the House on December 31, 1977. After his relationship with Koch soured, he resumed practicing law in 1979.

In 1986 Badillo attempted to revive his political career, but his run for a statewide comptroller position was unsuccessful. In 1993 he joined Rudy Giuliani's Republican-Liberal fusion ticket as a candidate for city comptroller. Though Giuliani narrowly won the mayoral election, Badillo lost to New York assemblyman Alan Hevesi. In 1998 Badillo officially switched his party affiliation to Republican. "As a lifelong Democrat, I did not make this decision lightly," Badillo said later. In his last campaign, Badillo lost the Republican mayoral primary to Mike Bloomberg in 2001.

After his congressional career, Badillo held a variety of administrative positions and worked as an attorney. Consistent with his long-standing interest in education, he served as a trustee for the City University of New York (CUNY); Badillo served as vice chairman of the board from 1997 to 1999 and as chairman from 1999 to 2001.

FOR FURTHER READING

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MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS

Columbia University, Oral History Research Office (New York, NY). Oral History: 1976, 34 pages. The interview includes Herman Badillo's memories of his childhood; his education, including college and law school; and his roles as a New York City Commissioner at the Department of Housing and Relocation, Bronx Borough President, and United States Congressman. The interview also includes Herman Badillo's observations on New York City politics in the 1960s and 1970s. Access to the interview is currently closed. A name index to the interview is available.

New York City Department of Records and Information Services, Municipal Archives (New York, NY). *Papers*: Deputy Mayor for Policy Records, 1979, 10 cubic feet. Includes correspondence and reports from Herman Badillo's tenure as deputy mayor of New York City.

NOTES

- 1 "Running for Mayor, in Perpetuity; Herman Badillo Is Hoping That the Timing Is Right," 9 May 2001, New York Times: B1. Herman Badillo was an official candidate for New York City mayor in 1969, 1973, 1977, and 2001. He also ran for the office in 1985 and 1993, but withdrew from these races after a short time.
- 2 Matt S. Meier, "Herman Badillo," Notable Latino Americans: A Biographical Dictionary (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997): 18–19; Herman Badillo, One Nation, One Standard: An Ex-Liberal on How Hispanics Can Succeed Just Like Other Immigrant Groups (New York: Sentinel, 2006): 9–14, 49–50; "Disputed Bronx Victor," 4 November 1965, New York Times: 51.
- 3 Herman Badillo, "Graduating to Higher Standards at City University," *Gotham Gazette*, http://www.gothamgazette.com/commentary/68.badillo.shtml.
- 4 Badillo, One Nation, One Standard: 15, 22; Meier, Notable Latino Americans: 19; "Puerto Rico Profile: Herman Badillo," 17 August 2001, Puerto Rico Herald.

- 5 'Youngest Commissioner," 17 November 1962, *New York Times*: 12; Vivian S. Toy, "Irma Badillo, 72, an Organizer for the Equal Rights Amendment," 18 May 1996, *New York Times*: 12; "Herman Badillo and Gail Roberts," 18 August 1996, *New York Times*: 56.
- 6 Meier, Notable Latino Americans: 20–21; Badillo, One Nation, One Standard: 22–23.
- 7 Peter Kihss, "Badillo Is Victor in Bronx by 2,086," 9 November 1965, *New York Times*: 38; Lyn Shepard, "Reform Tide Surges in Bronx," 25 September 1965, *Christian Science Monitor*: 2.
- 8 Clayton Knowles, "Badillo Joins Race as 'Only Liberal," 4 April 1969, *New York Times*: 1.
- 9 Richard L. Madden, "Badillo Innovates in His Diverse District," 26 August 1971, New York Times: 39. According to the Almanac of American Politics, the district was 34 percent African American and 30 percent Hispanic. Almanac of American Politics, 1972 (Washington, D.C.: National Journal Inc., 1971): 548–549.
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- 11 Peter Kihss, "Queens Court Voids Victory by Badillo," 24 September 1970, New York Times: 1; Will Lissner, "Appellate Division Upholds Badillo's Nomination in 21st District," 1 October 1970, New York Times: 37; "Top State Court Upholds Badillo," 8 October 1970, New York Times: 1; Almanac of American Politics, 1972: 549.
- 12 There was no Republican candidate in the 1970 general election; George Smaragdas ran as a Conservative. "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/ election-statistics; Murray Schumach, "Ex-Borough Leader Is Facing a Strong Conservative Bloc," 29 October 1970, New York Times: 50; Richard L. Madden, "Lowenstein Loses Seat in Congress," 4 November 1970, New York Times: 1.
- 13 Richard L. Madden, "2 in House Upset by Assignments," 29 January 1971, New York Times: 12.
- 14 David E. Rosenbaum, "Badillo Wins His Battle on House Committee Assignment, but Mrs. Abzug Loses," 4 February, 1971, New York Times: 21; "Badillo Gains Aid in Transfer Bid," 3 February 1971, New York Times: 38.
- 15 Congressional Record, House, 92nd Cong., 1st sess. (4 March 1971): 5141.
- 16 "Badillo Urges a \$20-Billion U.S. Loan to States," 5 March 1971, New York Times: 31.
- 17 Gene I. Maeroff, "Delays Reported in Mixed Schools," 22 May 1971, *New York Times*: 29.
- 18 Congressional Record, House, 92nd Cong., 1st sess. (4 May 1971): 13344; Richard L. Madden, "Badillo Says U.S. Programs Are

- Excluding Puerto Ricans," 5 May 1971, New York Times: 16; "Badillo in Plea for Puerto Rico," 1 November 1971, New York Times: 30.
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- 24 Almanac of American Politics, 1976 (Washington, D.C.: National Journal Inc., 1975): 699.
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- 27 Max H. Seigel, "Badillo-Ramos," 21 June 1972, New York Times: 29; "Results of Primary Contests in City and Suburbs," 22 June 1972, New York Times: 46.
- 28 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics.
- 29 The bilingual education amendment proposed by Badillo enjoyed majority support in the Senate. For background and a personal reflection of the events surrounding the legislation, see Badillo, *One Nation, One Standard*: 59–63. For a comprehensive summary of the Elementary and Secondary Education Amendments, see *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, 1974 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1975): 441–474.
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- 31 Martin Tolchin, "Badillo and Biaggi Staffs Toil On," 31 May 1973, New York Times: 36.
- 32 See, for example, Badillo's stance on unemployment, *Congressional Record*, House, 92nd Cong., 2nd sess. (2 March 1972): 6689–6690.
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